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ABSTRACT

This report examines the hypothesis that students and teachers hold different values in regard to the importance of school athletics versus school academic emphasis. In testing this hypothesis, data from the Youth in Transition Project and various questionnaires are used to compare the extent to which each group values both academic excellence and outstanding athletics as major goals for their schools. Findings indicate that students' academic and athletic values do not differ drastically from those of their teachers, and that there is little support for the hypothesis that there is a distinct adolescent subculture with regard to athletic and academic values. (Author/EB)

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Academics and Athletics in American High Schools:

Some Further Considerations of the Adolescent Subculture Hypothesis

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Introductory Statement

The Center for Social Organization of Schools has two primary objectives: to develop a scientific knowledge of how schools affect their students, and to use this knowledge to develop better school practices and organization.

The Center works through four programs to achieve its objectives. The Policy Studies in School Desegregation program applies the basic theories of social organization of schools to study the internal conditions of desegregated schools, the feasibility of alternative desegregation policies, and the interrelation of school desegregation with other equity issues such as housing and job desegregation. The School Organization program is currently concerned with authority-control structures, task structures, reward systems, and peer group processes in schools. It has produced a large-scale study of the effects of open schools, has developed Student Team Learning Instructional processes for teaching various subjects in elementary and secondary schools, and has produced a computerized system for schoolwide attendance monitoring. The School Process and Career Development program is studying transitions from high school to post secondary institutions and the role of schooling in the development of career plans and the actualization of labor market outcomes. The Studies in Delinquency and School Environments program is examining the interaction of school environments, school experiences, and individual characteristics in relation to in-school and later-life delinquency.

This report, prepared by the School Organization program, examines the "adolescent subculture" hypothesis that students and teachers hold different values in regard to the importance of school athletics vs. school academic emphases.

Abstract

This paper examines the adolescent subculture hypothesis in a comparison of student and teacher emphasis on academic and athletic values. Two basic research issues are explored: (1) Do students and teachers differ in the relative importance each group attaches to developing superior academics and outstanding athletics as major high school objectives? and (2) Are student perceptions of teachers' emphases on superior academics and outstanding athletics consistent with teacher self-reports?

The findings, based on a nationwide longitudinal survey--the Youth in Transition project--reveal little support for the existence of an adolescent counterculture. Students' academic and athletic values were not found to differ drastically from those of their teachers. Moreover, student perceptions of teachers' values in comparison with their own reveal opposite patterns than those predicted by the adolescent subculture thesis.

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Introduction

For nearly two decades a lively controversy among observers of secondary education in America has centered around the issue of value incongruence between the agents and clients of the nation's schools. Specifically, some argue that adolescents in American high schools have developed their own unique set of social values and pursue lifestyles which are at variance with those of the adult or dominant culture (Coleman, 1961; Parsons, 1964). Others, in contrast, argue that there is little difference in the values and beliefs of adolescents and adults (Elkin and Westley, 1955); furthermore, the values and interests often attributed to American adolescents are apparently derived from and shared by most of their parents (Berger, 1963).

Despite the persistence of this controversy, there have been few attempts to empirically assess the validity of the adolescent subculture hypothesis. Furthermore, as Jensen (1970) notes, "the model of the adolescent subculture has been developed largely on data from adolescents alone....Comparisons are made with few attempts to provide comparative data.... [Instead] adolescent values are contrasted with the hypothetical model of the adult world."

The lack of comparative data has continued to be a major inadequacy in studies of American adolescents. Perhaps the most notable exception is a small study comparing selected value dimensions among students and teachers in a single secondary school in North Carolina (Eve, 1975). That study provided some evidence, at least in terms of most of the value dimensions assessed--cheating and mischief in school, sports,

fighting, buying and selling marijuana, partying, drinking, and buying fancy cars--of a somewhat distinct student subculture value system. Students and teachers were found to differ along all of the dimensions except sports and cars. Although the study offers interesting insights about the existence of an adolescent subculture, its generalizability is limited. Besides questions about sample size and representativeness, one of the central issues in the adolescent subculture debate--i.e., the relative value of academics and athletics--was not addressed directly.

The present study seeks to clarify this issue by examining student and teacher value orientations for both academics and athletics. As with the Eve study, our intent is to try to verify whether there is, in fact, an adolescent subculture which stands in basic opposition to adult values. Thus, the emphasis in this paper is not on what causes value incongruence between adolescents and adults, but rather whether such a gap exists.

This study differs from most previous research on this topic in several ways. First, the research design employs a large representative national sample of teachers and students, in contrast to the more limited samples used in most previous studies of this type. Second, comparisons of actual student-teacher value orientations are made rather than comparing student values to some hypothetical adult value perspective. Finally, we also measure student perceptions of adult (teacher) values in order to provide a more complete picture of the high school social climate, as viewed by adolescents themselves.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

The data for this study came from the Youth in Transition project, a nationwide longitudinal study of young men. The project used a multi-stage probability sample, clustered by school, of all tenth-grade boys in public high schools in 1966 in the 49 contiguous states. Three data collections took place during the years when most were still in high school: in the fall of 1966 (tenth grade), spring of 1968 (eleventh grade), and spring of 1969 (twelfth grade). They consisted of interviews and questionnaires administered by professional interviewers on the staff of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. The final data collection was a self-completed mail questionnaire during the spring and early summer of 1975, 5 years after most respondents had completed high school.

Of the original selected sample of 2,277 boys located in 87 schools, data were collected from 2,213 (97.2%) in 1966. In the final wave (1974), sample attrition reduced the number of completed questionnaires to 1,608 (72.7% of the original respondents). For purposes of this article we will limit the data analysis, for students, to only those 1,608 young men whose participation in the study extended through 1974.

The teacher data were gathered through mailed questionnaires in the spring of 1968. Forty full-time teachers in each of the 87 schools were randomly selected from schools having more than 40 faculty members (otherwise, the entire faculty was surveyed in cases of schools with less than 40 full-time instructional personnel). The total faculty sample is composed of 2,087 teachers who responded to the survey (70% response rate).

Measures and Analysis

In order to assess empirically the existence of a distinct adolescent subculture with specific regard to athletic and academic values, student and teacher responses to the following questionnaire items were compared: (a) How much importance do you think should be attached to "developing outstanding athletes and athletic teams" as an objective of your high school; and, How much importance do you think should be attached to "achieving outstanding academic performance" as an objective of your high school; (b) How much importance do you think the administrators and teachers in your high school gave to "developing outstanding athletes and athletic teams" as an objective of your high school; and, How much importance do you think the administrators and teachers in your high school gave to "achieving outstanding academic performance" as an objective of your high school. The response categories for each of these items consisted of a five category fixed-choice response with alternatives ranging from low to extremely high. For clarity in graphic presentation the responses have been collapsed into low, moderate and high ranges, however, the statistical analyses were all performed using the original five interval responses. Item one as used in the analyses includes both student and teacher self-perceptions with regard to athletic and academic values, while item two consists of student only perceptions of the apparent significance of athletics and academics to teachers and administrators in their schools.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov two sample test was applied to determine whether the distributions of student and teacher responses may reasonably

be assumed to be drawn from populations with the same distribution. If the two samples have in fact been drawn from the same population distribution, then the cumulative distributions of both samples may be expected to be fairly close to each other, inasmuch as they both should show only random deviations from the population distribution. If the two sample cumulative distributions are too far apart at any point this suggests that the samples come from different populations, thereby indicating that the null hypothesis (H_o) should be rejected (Siegel, 1966, pp. 127-36).

A critical value of .01 will be assumed for all statistical tests. The research (null) hypotheses are as follows:

H_{o_1} : Teachers' ratings of "achieving outstanding academic performance," as a major objective of their high schools, will not differ from those of their students.

H_{o_2} : Teachers' ratings of "developing outstanding athletes and athletic teams," as a major objective of the high schools, will not differ from that of their students.

H_{o_3} : Students perceive their teachers and administrators as rating "achieving outstanding academic performance," as a major objective of their high schools, the same as they themselves rate this objective.

H_{o_4} : Students perceive their teachers and administrators as rating "developing outstanding athletes and athletic teams," as a major objective of their high schools, the same as they themselves rate this objective.

Findings

Students' and Teachers' Own Ratings of Academics and Athletics

The results reveal that, in general, with regard to high school objectives, teachers attach somewhat greater importance to achieving academic excellence than do students (Figure 1). On the other hand, the data show that students attach somewhat greater significance to developing outstanding athletics than do teachers (Figure 2). Although both findings fail to support the null-hypotheses (i.e., H_{o_1} and H_{o_2} respectively), the results are consistent with traditional expectations and views of youth and adult cultures. However, the magnitude of these differences do not appear as great as popular notions of adolescent subcultures might suggest. For example, while students and teachers differ by approximately 12 percentage points in the extent to which they rate both athletics and academics as major priorities for their high schools and although these differences are statistically significant for this sample, a difference in level of agreement with academic and athletic values of this relatively small magnitude does not suggest substantially antithetical youth and adult values of the sort implied by the proponents of the adolescent subculture hypothesis.

Students' Own and Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Rating of Academics and Athletics

This section presents results which compare students' own views with those which students perceive to be held by their high school teachers and administrators. Figure 3 shows that students consider themselves as attaching a higher level of importance to achieving outstanding

academics than they perceive their high school teachers and administrators to do. In contrast, Figure 4 shows that students report that their high school teachers and administrators attach greater importance to developing athletics as a major school objective than they do themselves. Like the results discussed in the preceeding section, these findings clearly do not support the null-hypotheses 3 and 4. Unlike the earlier results, however, these findings stand in bold contradiction to popular images of adolescent society and youth subcultures. Again, although the percentage differences are not large (approximately 10 points for both academic and athletic values), they are statistically significant for this sample.

Summary and Discussion

It appears that there are elements of truth in both positions of the long standing debate between researchers who feel there is a different subculture among adolescents which is anti-adult (i.e., anti-mainstream values) in character and those who contend that adolescent values are simply reflections of adult values. As noted in the preceeding discussion, we found small, but significant differences between high school students and teachers in the extent to which each group values both academic excellence and outstanding athletics as major goals for their schools. This finding offers some limited support for the position of Coleman (1961) and Parsons (1964), that American high school youth hold values which are different from and are at variance with the dominant cultural system. It is important to note, however, that the observed differences are more a matter of degree than of type. A slight majority of students

(65 percent) and teachers (53 percent) both feel that the development of athletics is a highly worthwhile objective to be pursued by their high schools. And, an overwhelming majority of both students (80 percent) and teachers (92 percent) felt that achieving outstanding academic performance is a highly worthwhile objective. Thus, it is apparent that such differences in educational values between students and teachers as have been noted by those who opt to define the adolescent social system as a counterculture are not incongruent with or antithetical to adult mainstream values, but rather conform to a similar underlying structure, differing only in intensity of belief.

Our comparison of students' own views with those which students attribute to their high school teachers and administrators is even more illuminating in regard to the adolescent subculture debate. Surprisingly, our data show that students think of themselves as placing a greater emphasis on academic excellence (80 percent) than do their teachers and administrators (70 percent). In addition, students perceive their teachers and administrators as placing a greater emphasis on developing outstanding athletics (74 percent) than they themselves do (65 percent). The most straightforward interpretation of these results is that students' values are more consistent with dominant cultural traditions than those of their school officials. In terms of the adolescent subculture hypothesis suggested by Coleman and Parsons, these results are clearly contradictory and offer more support for Berger's thesis that adolescent values are in part derived from and shared by a majority of adults. It should be pointed out here that the use of teachers for the adult

comparison group is likely to have yielded greater degrees of difference on value dimensions than would normally have been expected had a comparison group of parents been included in the study. Teachers do not represent the full adult population in the same way that students may represent the future adult population or a reflection of the full parent population. Thus, the small differences noted cannot be said to be critical for the adult-student debate, and in that light the findings for hypotheses 3 and 4 are even more surprising. The study speaks to a student-teacher values debate, but shows that there is an amazing degree of congruence among these populations. Similar patterns of youth-adult value congruence have also been reported in studies of adolescent-parental values (Dager, Manderscheid, and Stroup, 1977).

Taken as a whole, this study, like Eve's (1975), has provided evidence that although students do maintain a statistically ($p < .01$) distinct value system, this system is primarily conventional in its orientation and differs only to a relatively small degree from the value system of the adult world. More importantly, however, the results imply that in regard to educational and athletic values students report that their own values are more consistent with and supportive of dominant cultural patterns than those of their school authorities. These findings suggest a need for further study of adolescent and adult values with full adult populations and across other dimensions than sports and scholarship, also taking into consideration social structural and social psychological factors which might differentially impact upon these relationships (i.e., race, sex, social class, intelligence, educational

and/or occupational aspirations). Despite the limitations of the present study these findings illuminate some complexities of what is often erroneously presumed to be a simple and widely understood issue.

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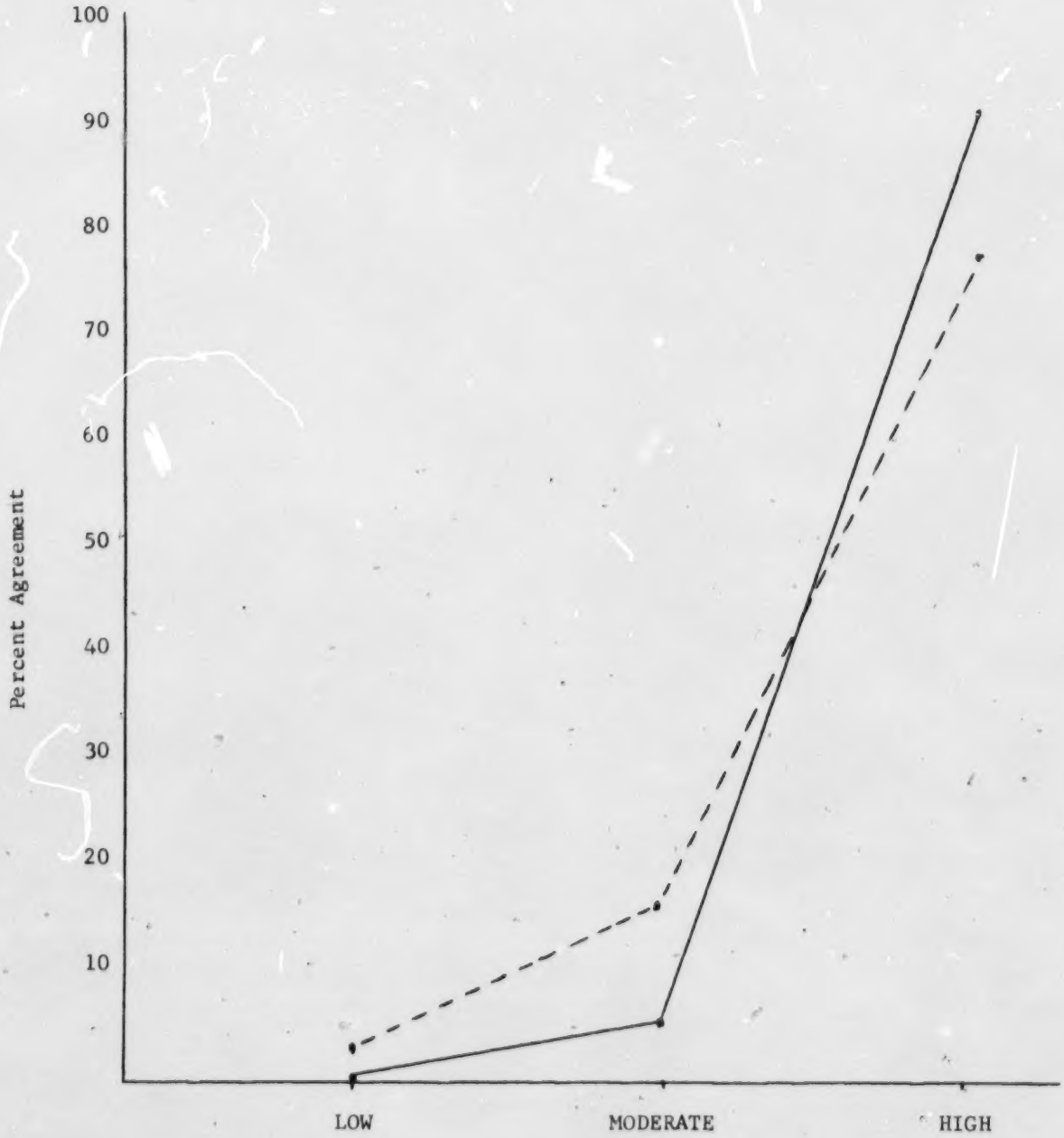
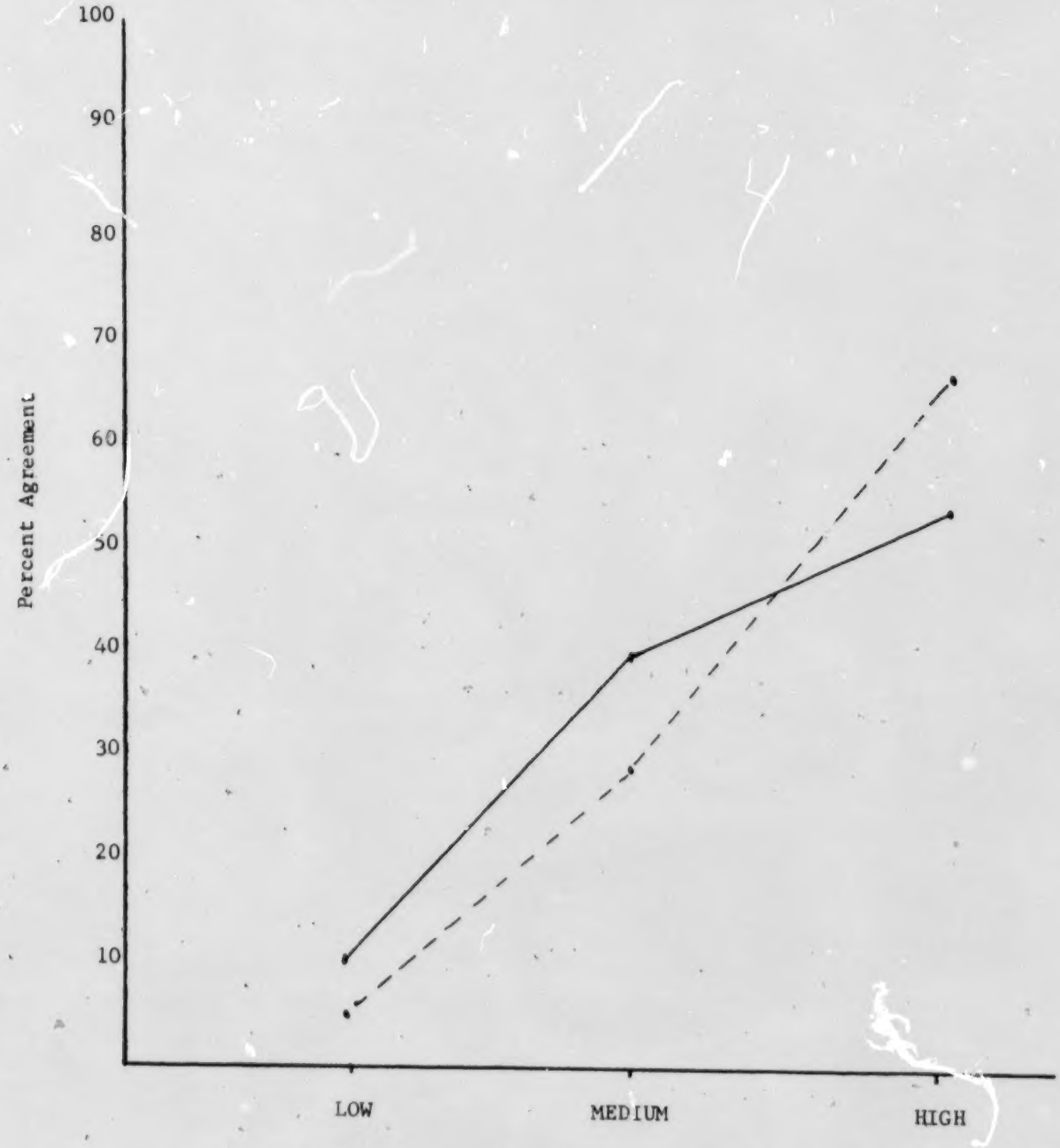
Figure 1. -- Level of Importance Which Respondents Felt Their High Schools Should Attach to "Achieving Outstanding Academic Performance"



N = 2004 Teachers Self Reported Feelings

N = 1474 Students Self Reported Feelings D = .06 ; $p < .01$

Figure 2. -- Level of Importance Which Respondents Felt Their High Schools Should Attach to "Developing Outstanding Athletes and Athletic Teams"



N = 2004 Teachers Self Reported Feelings

N = 1474 Students Self Reported Feelings D = .06 ; $p < .01$

Figure 3. -- Level of Importance Which Respondents Felt Their High School Should Attach to "Achieving Outstanding Academic Performance"

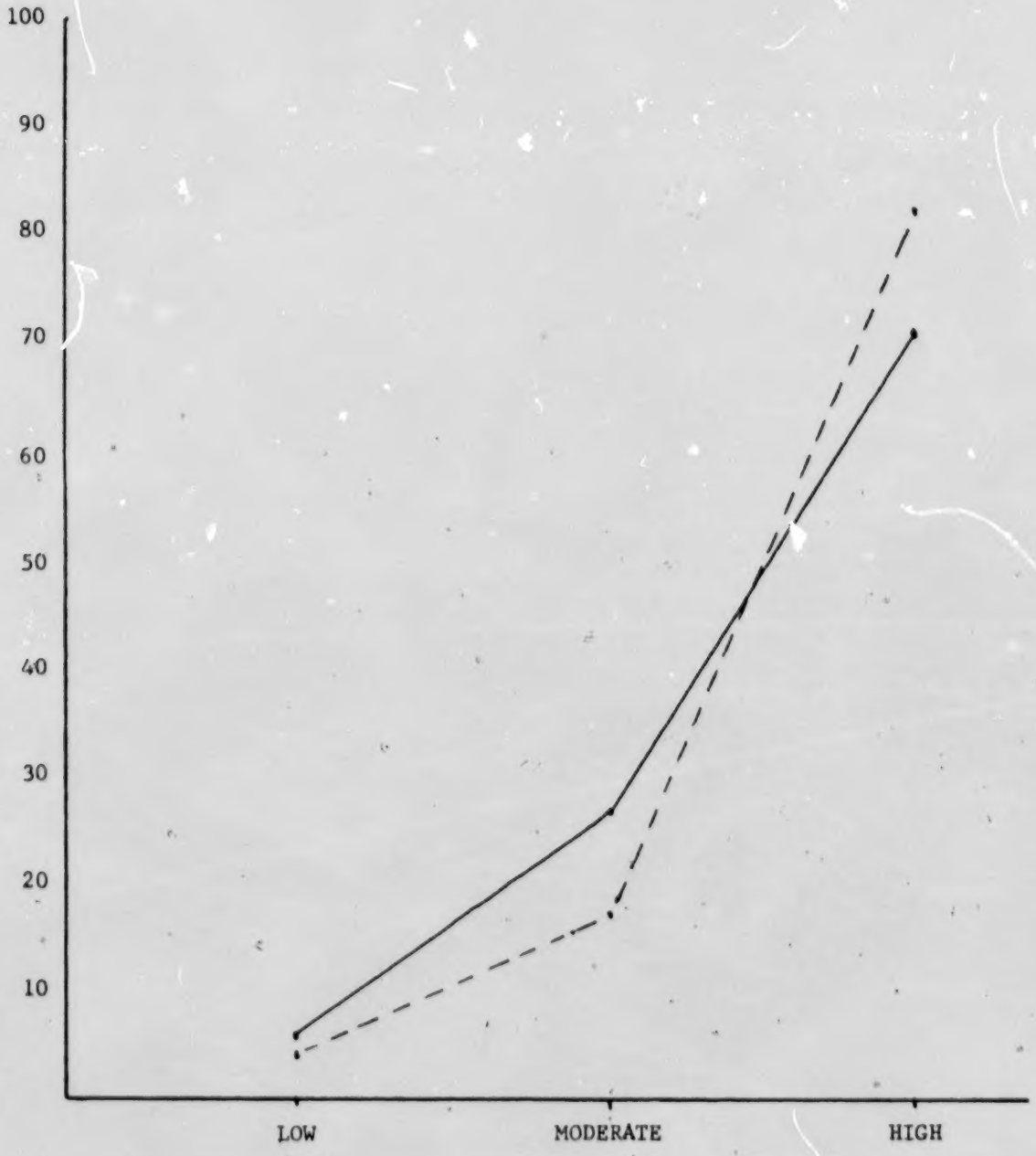
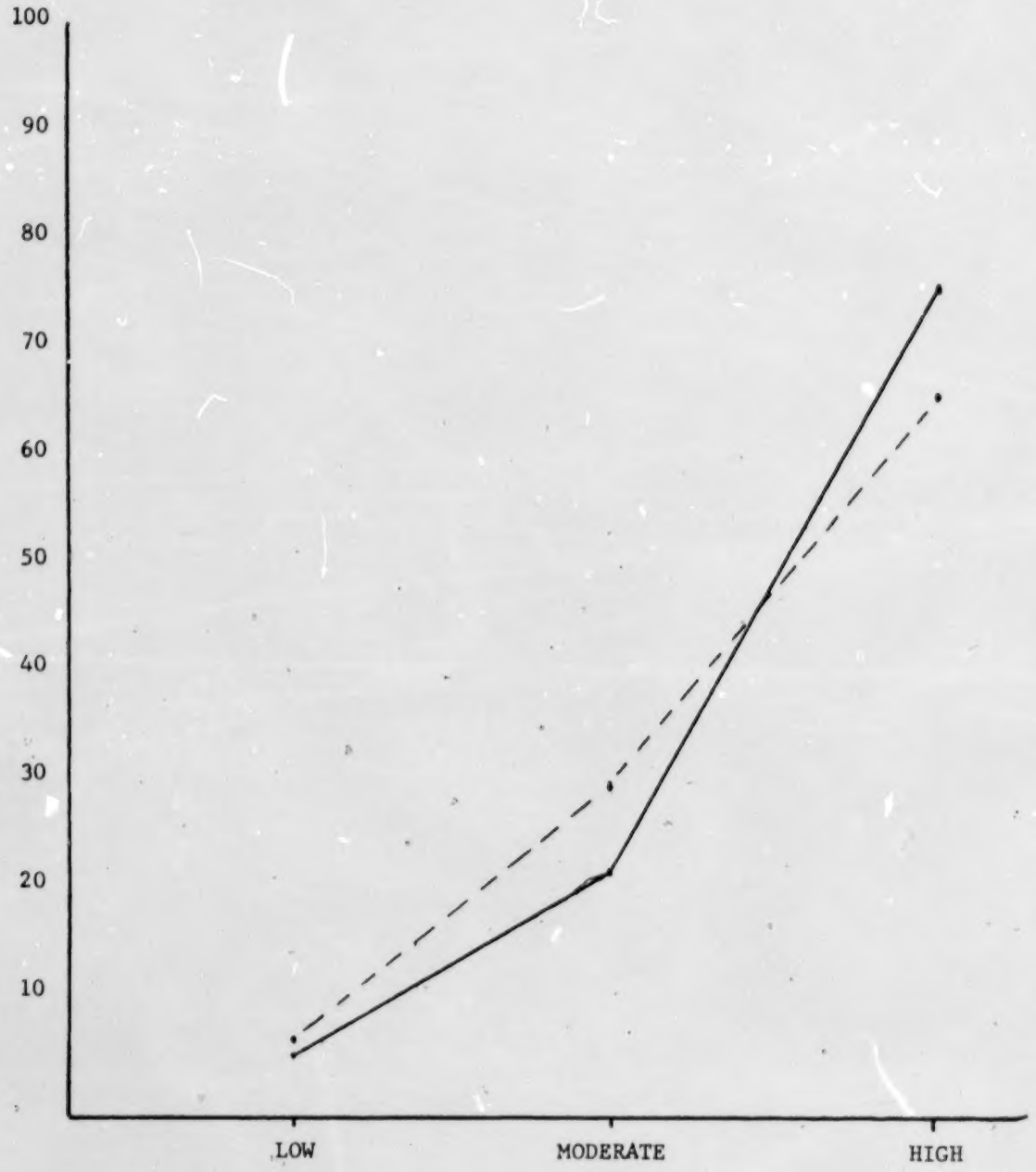


Figure 4. -- Level of Importance Which Respondents Felt Their High Schools Should Attach to "Developing Outstanding Athletes and Athletic Teams"



N = 1523 Teachers and Administrators Feelings as Perceived by Students

N = 1474 Students Self Reported Feelings D = 106; $p < .01$